



# A “Tools for Teachers” Approach for Infusing Social Skills Instruction into Daily Teaching Activities

James S. Leffert  
Mary E. Brady  
Gary N. Siperstein

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## Abstract

Students participate in a *social community* of learners. For children with learning problems, mastering the skills needed to actively participate in this community can be a challenge. How can teachers find time to provide social skills instruction, given the pressures to teach academic subjects first and foremost?

This article shows school personnel ways to infuse social skills instruction into their existing instructional activities throughout the school day by:

- Integrating social skills and academic instruction.
- Amplifying the impact of pre-planned instruction through impromptu responses to naturally occurring social skills problems.
- Adding a social skills dimension to the classroom environment and routines.

This article introduces and illustrates use of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers, a suite of instructional planning aids available on the web at [www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php](http://www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php). Findings presented show that school personnel have successfully utilized the tools to infuse social skills instruction into daily teaching activities.

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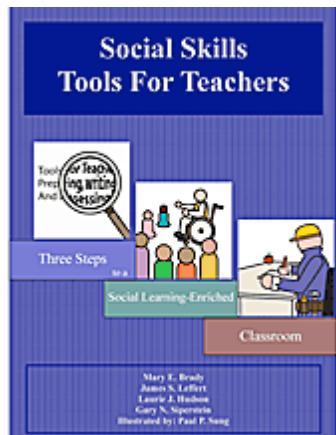
## Keywords

Social skills, social skills instruction

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*Cover of Tools for Teacher guidebook as it appears free on the web.*



A group of fourth grade students are working on posters for a community wide contest that promotes recycling. One student, Victoria, is pleased with the idea she came up with: a picture of a cat with the slogan “Give your trash nine lives!” Then she sees that her classmate Kate, who was sitting nearby, is also drawing a cat with the accompanying slogan, “Cats have 9 lives and so can your trash!” An argument breaks out as Victoria accuses Kate of stealing her idea. Soon, Victoria is yelling at Kate and Kate is shouting back. The entire class stops what they are doing to watch what is happening and what the teacher, Mr. Ackerman, will do about it.

Across town, five eighth grade students appear at first glance to be working together on a project that their teacher, Ms. Ferry, has assigned them. As she hovers nearby, Ms. Ferry notices that two of the students, Amy and Chiara, are actually working diligently on the project. Another student, Paul, is also participating, by doing parts of the task that Amy and Chiara tell him to do, for example, lettering captions on a poster. Whenever Paul offers his

suggestions, however, the two girls consistently dismiss his ideas, leaving Paul making noises like “Aww...” and comments like “Come on!” in frustration. The remaining two students, Jared and Jen, are not participating. Jared is doodling and Jen is looking at the clock.

Both of these vignettes illustrate how the social interaction that takes place in the classroom affects academic learning. In the fourth grade example, a disagreement that breaks out between students disrupts their academic work and distracts other students. In the eighth grade example, the pattern of social interaction during a group task perpetuates a division of the

**“For students at all age levels, competence at managing the social situations that arise in the classroom is often a prerequisite, and a critical ingredient for making academic progress.”**

group into three participating and two non-participating students and excludes one of the three participating students from having a voice in the decision-making.

As these vignettes demonstrate, learning takes place in a social community. For students at all age levels, competence at managing the social situations that arise in the classroom is often a prerequisite, and a critical ingredient, for making academic progress (see gray box, page 7: “Social Skills and Academic Performance”). Teachers and other school personnel do not need to be convinced of the importance of equipping their students to manage the social challenges they face daily. However,

when we visit classrooms, they consistently tell us that in light of the pressures that teachers experience to deliver measurable improvements in students' academic skills, they have difficulty allocating time in the already crowded school day for this critical subject area.

### Infuse Social Skills Instruction Into the Existing Academic Curriculum

Although such pressures are a reality, we believe that the present climate creates an opportunity for school personnel to consider a different approach for teaching social skills—one that equips educators to infuse social skills instruction into their existing instructional activities rather than treating it as an “add-on” to the curriculum. We invite teachers and other school personnel who are searching for new ways to deliver social skills instruction to use a set of tools that we have developed, called the Social Skills Tools for Teachers. These Tools are available on the Internet at [www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php](http://www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php). This set of tools guides them through the steps involved in integrating social skills instruction into their existing classroom activities. The Social Skills Tools for Teachers shows teachers and other school personnel how to take advantage of three types of instructional opportunities: 1) planned instruction; 2) impromptu responses, and 3) classroom modifications

In **planned instruction**, teachers integrate social skills instruction within academic instruction (English/language arts, social studies, and science). During naturally occurring social interaction, teacher and other school personnel use **impromptu responses** to stimulate students to practice “Social Thinking Skills”. In addition, school personnel use **classroom**

**modifications** to change the learning environment and classroom routines to promote self-initiated use of social skills. When school personnel take advantage of these three instructional opportunities, they do not need to carve out a separate time for social skills instruction, because opportunities for social skills instruction are present every hour of the school day.

We believe that teachers and other school personnel will find the Social Skills Tools for Teachers to be a practical resource for enriching social skills learning in their classrooms because it utilizes each educator's existing instructional practices and activities as his/her starting point. Because the Tools present a wealth of options for infusing instruction in targeted Social Thinking Skills into the existing academic instruction, a user has considerable freedom to select whichever options best fit his/her style and preferences and the students' particular needs. Since the Social Skills Tools for Teachers shows educators how to enhance the existing curriculum rather than offering an “add-on” program, the specific modifications of instructional activities that teachers and other school personnel make as a result of using these Tools are likely to differ from educator to educator and classroom to classroom.

The illustrations of social problem situations described at the beginning of this article are adapted from actual situations reported by participants in workshops that we conducted to introduce the Social Skills Tools for Teachers to educators. We will report on these illustrations, and on the responses of the fictional classroom teachers, Mr. Ackerman and Ms. Ferry, as if they are actual case studies to illustrate how school personnel have used the Social Skills Tools for Teachers to identify the Social Thinking

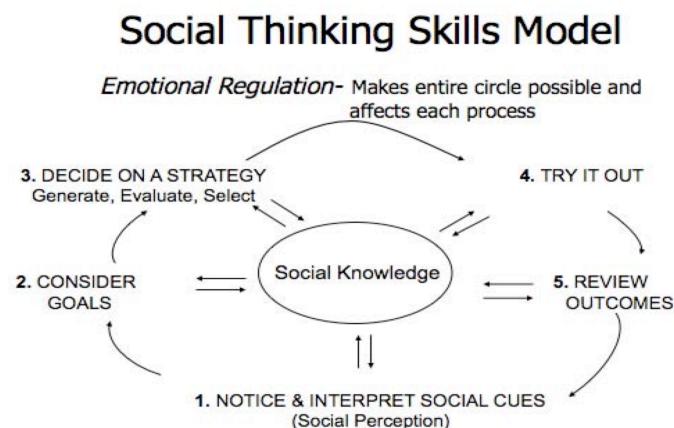
Skills that their students need work in and to implement instructional interventions as part of their academic instructional program.

### The Social Thinking Skills Model

The Social Skills Tools for Teachers is built on a Social Thinking Skills theoretical model, adapted from work by Crick and Dodge (1994). As Figure 1 indicates, the model describes six processes or “Social Thinking Skills” that combine to enable children to produce socially competent behavior. The model also explains how problems in emotion regulation and social

thinking combine to produce social skills difficulties and how experience, including guided practice, can stimulate a child’s acquisition of the social knowledge that is needed to perform these processes skillfully. Overall, this model provides a blueprint for teaching students to “think on their feet” in social situations. When students experience a variety of opportunities throughout the school day to practice the skills specified by this model, they can become increasingly competent at navigating social problems on their own.

Figure 1: Model Schema



#### Research Findings

Each of 6 social thinking skills contributes uniquely to competent social behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Problems with emotion regulation and social thinking combine to produce social skills difficulties (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemire & Arsenio, 2000).

Children with disabilities often experience difficulty performing the model components, and these difficulties, in turn, contribute to social behavior. (Tur-Kaspa, 2002; Leffert, Siperstein, & Widaman, 2010, in press; Leffert & Siperstein, 2002).

### Examples of Curricula and Programs That Address Model Components

- Promoting Alternative Thinking Skills (PATHS; Kusche & Geenberg, 1994)
- Promoting Social Success (Siperstein & Rickards, 2004)
- Skillstreaming (McGinness & Goldstein, 1997)
- Second Step (Beland, 1992)
- Open Circle (Seigle, Lange, & Macklem, 1997)

One way that the Social Thinking Skills Model can be valuable is that it helps school personnel to reflect on what the social behaviors they observe tell us about students' thinking patterns--to look at recurring patterns of less than optimal social interaction as clues about possible underlying difficulties that students are having in processing social information.

Mr. Ackerman identified problems in the Social Thinking Skills areas of social perception, goal consideration, and strategy evaluation. Victoria may have a legitimate complaint about a classmate using her idea but her high emotional arousal was causing problems, by provoking Kate, in response, to become aroused also. Based on several previous instances in which Mr. Ackerman observed Victoria get overly upset and accusing toward classmates when a disagreement arose with a peer and with the help of this model, Mr. Ackerman hypothesized that Victoria's **interpretation** of classmates' behavior--in this case, that Kate was "stealing", and her concern that Kate's action would prevent her accomplishing her **goal** of producing a "special"

entry that would win the contest--were fueling her reaction. Victoria, drawing conclusions about Kate's intentions, is likely also unaware that Kate was probably pursuing a very different **goal** than Victoria's, that is, to overcome anxiety by finishing the assignment. Based on Mr. Ackerman's previous observations of Kate, he suspected that Kate may have been nervous because of the demands of the task, and because of this, settled on using Victoria's idea rather than thinking up an idea of her own. He also thought that when Kate selected this strategy, she probably didn't give much thought to **generating alternative strategies** for dealing with task-related anxiety, or **anticipated possible consequences** of using someone else's idea without asking.

Similarly, when applying the Social Thinking Skills model to the middle school example, Ms. Ferry identified difficulties in the skill areas of social perception, goal consideration, strategy generation, and strategy evaluation/selection as contributing to the maladaptive way that the group was going about working on the project. In the skill area of **goal consideration**, the individual students, as well as the teacher, were pursuing divergent goals and some participants were experiencing frustration attaining their goals. Only three of the students, Amy, Chiara, and Paul, were pursuing the goal of getting the task done. The other two students, Jared and Jen, appeared to have as their goal passing the time while avoiding doing the project and/or interacting with the others. The three students who were trying to get the project done also seemed to be trying to have their say in deciding how the task gets done. However, only Amy and Chiara were able to attain

this latter goal because they consistently ruled Paul's suggestions out of order. None of the students appeared to be spontaneously pursuing the potential alternative goal, valued by the teacher, of encouraging the participation of all group members. Ms. Ferry also identified problems in the skill area of **noticing and interpreting cues**. She observed that Amy and Chiara didn't seem to be paying attention to cues indicating boredom and lack of involvement by Jared and Jen, nor did they pay attention to Paul's reactions, whose ideas they shot down. Rather, they appeared to interpret Paul's behavior as "making dumb suggestions" and Jared and Jen's behavior as goofing off and showing a lack of interest. Regarding the skill areas of **strategy generation** and **strategy evaluation/selection**, Ms. Ferry thought that the group members may be lacking a repertoire of strategies that they can use to help the group work well together. However, she considered that some members of the group may know some of these strategies but didn't use them because these strategies didn't fit their goals. Actually, the group members

may have **evaluated** their current ways of dealing with the situation positively, in light of the **goals** they appeared to be pursuing, rather than seeing them as counter-productive.

These illustrations highlight the role that limitations in Social Thinking Skills play in every day social difficulties. It should be noted that these skills are not discrete behaviors, such as cooperating or giving eye contact, but rather fundamental building blocks of social problem solving that are important in all social situations. An instructional approach that equips children to apply these skills is not unique to the Social Skills Tools for Teachers. Elements of the social thinking skills model are addressed in popular social and emotional learning and violence prevention programs (see gray box). The Social Skills Tools for Teachers is unique, however, in its approach of helping school personnel to integrate instruction based on this model into existing instructional activities.

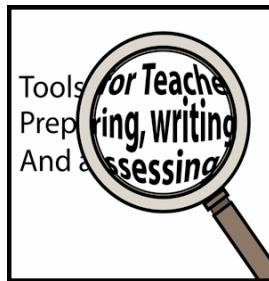
#### *How Social and Academic Progress are Connected:*

- Difficulty with peer relationships can lead to academic failure (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987);
- Limited social skills increases the likelihood of academic difficulties (Parker & Asher, 1987), but having competent social skills contributes to academic progress (Ray & Elliott, 2006; Wentzel, 1993);
- Acquisition of social skills leads to increased academic on-task engagement and improved academic performance, including for children with disabilities (Ladd, 1990; Miller, Lane, & Wehby, 2005; Vitaro, Tremblay, Gagnon, & Pelletier, 1994; O'Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997);

## How to Access and Use the Tools

Generally, when we conduct professional development workshops for school personnel, participants have a copy of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers at their side. In this article, we offer readers a similar experience by providing a step-by-step guide in how to use these Tools. The examples of social situations presented at the beginning of this article, provided by workshop participants, will illustrate the steps that educators can follow in using the tools. The tools themselves are available on the internet at no cost. Readers can simply browse and/or download them at [www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php](http://www.csde.umb.edu/ToolsforTeachers.php).

### Tool One: What's a Student to Learn? *Icon for Tool 1*



Tool One of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers, What's a Student to Learn?, guides teachers through the steps of 1) becoming conversant with the Social Thinking Skills Model (i.e., describing each component skill in teacher-friendly and kid-friendly language and applying it to every day social situations); 2) observing individual students' performance of these skills; and 3) generating student objectives, aligned with state learning standards, for addressing social thinking skills.

**“By providing opportunities throughout the school day for students to practice Social Thinking Skills, they can help their students to develop a richer understanding of social situations and to resolve potential problems on their own with minimal adult intervention.”**

Workshop participants report that Tool One provides them with a new way of thinking about—and convenient language for describing—the reasons that some of their students are having social difficulties and for selecting particular skills to address through instructional intervention. One of the practical aids in Tool One is a checklist that guides school personnel in observing their students' performance of the Social Thinking Skills. Once school personnel have used this checklist to identify the particular skill areas in which their students could benefit from instruction, they can utilize the remainder of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers to guide them through the process of turning classrooms into “social skills instruction enriched environments.” By providing opportunities throughout the school day for students to practice Social Thinking Skills, they can help their students to develop a richer understanding of social situations such as these and learn to resolve potential problems on their own with minimal adult intervention.

Table 1: Linking Skills & Objectives to Curriculum Standards

| Social Thinking Skill    | Objective *  | State Learning Standard  |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Interpreting social cues | Student will distinguish between benign and hostile intent for observed actions during actual and hypothetical social conflict situations. | Massachusetts Health Standards Mental Health 5.7 Identify and describe the experience of different feelings and how they affect daily functioning.                                   |
| Goal setting             | Student will identify several possible goals for a common social problem before choosing one to work towards.                              | Illinois Goal 1.C. 2a. Social Emotional Learning: Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals:   |
| Generating strategies    | Student will predict the consequences (both positive and negative) of strategies he/she generates to reach his identified goal.            | California Health Education Developing and using effective coping strategies, including critical thinking, effective decision making, goal setting; practice of problem solving:.... |

\* Performance criteria materials and context would be set based on particular student.

Mr. Ackerman or Ms. Ferry might use Tool One to help them identify the Social Thinking Skills to target, specify as an objective, and align with state learning standards.

#### Tool Two: What's a Teacher to Do?

##### *Icon for tool 2*



Tool Two of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers, What's a Teacher to Do?, guides school personnel through the steps of 1) “mapping” their existing social skills instructional activities onto the Social Thinking Skills model in order to determine which components of this model they are currently addressing and which components they are not yet addressing; 2) ex-

amining their current instructional activities to determine the extent to which they are using three instructional practice opportunities—planned instruction, impromptu instruction, and modification of the classroom environment and routines—to address each model skill component; 3) turning the classroom into a “social skills instruction-enriched environment” by developing instructional strategies that integrate social and academic instruction and that take advantage of each of the three instructional practice opportunities.

Using a chart provided by Tool Two that features the six Social Thinking Skills, educators can easily “map” their current instructional practices for teaching social skills. School personnel who do so are likely to be pleasantly surprised (as participants in our workshops have been) to find that without realizing it, they are already addressing certain components of the Social Thinking Skills model, for example, by working with their students on selecting

appropriate social strategies. Furthermore, this mapping exercise will likely draw the attention of school personnel to additional Social Thinking Skills, such as interpreting social cues or considering goals, that they may not be addressing yet but which are nonetheless necessary for students to accomplish in order to select appropriate strategies on their own. In this fashion, the “mapping” exercise highlights those Social Thinking Skills that still need to be targeted and the instructional practice opportunities that are available, but as yet are unused, for providing instruction in these skills.

Once school personnel have obtained this information, they can now utilize the subsequent sections in Tool Two that offer suggestions for integrating social skills instruction into existing instructional activities, through planned instruction, impromptu instruction, and modification of the classroom environment and routines. These sections assist school personnel in identifying particular strategies and suggestions that are feasible and relevant to their students’ needs. At this point, we will offer examples of instructional strategies that address the specific Social Thinking Skills difficulties that the students in the classroom scenarios that we mentioned previously were experiencing.

#### Using Planned Instruction to Teach Social Thinking Skills

We will begin with planned instruction. Since infusing instruction in Social Thinking Skills into reading/language arts lessons is a convenient and potentially fruitful way to deliver planned instruction in these skills, Tool Two offers extensive guidelines and illustrations for delivering instruction that integrates these two subject

areas. Combining literature lessons with instruction in social skills is easy because descriptions of non-verbal and language cues that convey feelings and intentions, the pursuit of goals and encounters with obstacles to their attainment, and the selection and evaluation of different strategies to solve social problems are all basic elements of literature, as well as key social thinking skills.

**“Teachers have reported that infusing a social skills dimension into the language arts curriculum stimulates greater collaboration among students.”**

#### Embedding Social Skills Instruction in English/Language Arts Instruction

Table 2 provides examples of specific ways that our fictional fourth and eighth grade teachers, Mr. Ackerman, and Ms. Ferry, can address their students’ Social Thinking Skill learning needs through lessons that use grade-appropriate literature selections as a starting point. For each Social Thinking Skill targeted (listed in the first column), the table lists activities (in the second and third columns) that provide practice in recognizing and applying the skill in the book that the students are reading. These activities serve to enhance students’ comprehension of the story and understanding of elements of literature while simultaneously introducing the students to Social Thinking Skills. Finally, the fourth column presents sample activities in which the literature selections serve as jumping off points for students to practice applying

these skills directly to their daily life experiences.

Table 2.

**Tool 2: Using Children's Literature as a Stimulus for Teaching Social Thinking Skills**

| Skill and Problem  | Recognizing/<br>Applying Skill in<br>Literature Context  | Example of this Skill from<br>Literature*  | Recognizing/<br>Applying Skill in<br>Real-Life<br>Situations   |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p><b>Social Perception:</b><br/>Makes hostile interpretation of others' intentions—colored by emotional reactions.<br/>Reaches premature conclusions on basis of limited information.<br/>Different emotional reactions based upon different interpretation of a person's intent.</p>     | <p><b>Find examples of:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--language and images describing emotions.</li> <li>--change in characters' perceptions of others and reasons for their behavior.</li> <li>--role of emotions and incomplete information in characters' interpretations.</li> <li>--different perspectives about a person's behavior.</li> </ul>  | <p><b>Emotions:</b> “The truth of it slapped me full in the face” (S, p. 9)<br/><b>Change in perceptions:</b> Ana sees Kim burying something and thinks she is hiding drugs, not planting seeds (S, p. 7)<br/><b>Different perspectives:</b> “Wilma and I hugged our father with our joy.” “Then my mother came out....There was no smile on her face.” (G. p. 13)<br/>Penny thinks she is exposing pregnant teens to the “miracle of life” at the garden but Mari-cela “hated the feel of dirt under her nails” (S, pp. 68-69)</p>  | <p><b>Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--recall similar examples from one's own life experience.</li> <li>--describe real-life situations from multiple perspectives</li> <li>--depict contrasting ways of arriving at interpretation when upset and after using “calming down strategies”.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Goal Consideration:</b><br/>Doesn't apply concept “goal” to social situations.<br/>Doesn't reflect on his/her own goals.<br/>Doesn't consider others' goals – unaware that they may be different.<br/>Focuses on trying to attain one goal rather than balancing multiple goals.</p> | <p><b>Find examples of:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--varied goals pursued by different characters.</li> <li>--characters who are pursuing opposing goals.</li> <li>--characters who are trying to achieve multiple goals.</li> <li>--obstacles that arise to a character attaining his/her goal.</li> </ul> <p><b>Describe:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--how a character's behavior might be different if his/her goals were different.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Goals:</b> to preserve her dad's memory (Kim), to get rich (Virgil's dad), to “mend rips in the neighbor-hood’ (Sam), to win back his ex-girlfriend (Curtis) (S)<br/><b>Opposing goals:</b> “We're supposed to be saving for a new house! She said. Your brothers are saving for houses of their own and you don't see them out buying new cars every year!” (G, p. 18)<br/><b>Obstacles:</b> Leona tries to get the city to remove trash from the lot but gets nowhere (S, pp. 26-27).<br/><b>Multiple goals:</b> Sam starts a contest not just to solve the water problem but also to bring people together into a community. (S, pp. 48-50)</p> | <p><b>Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--recall an experience of working with a person whose goal/motivation differed from yours.</li> <li>--describe different goals that a single person or that different people may have in a real-life situation.</li> <li>--depict differences in the behavior you would expect to see if a person were pursuing a different goal or trying to balance two goals instead of just pursuing one goal.</li> </ul> |

|  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Strategy Selection/Evaluation:</b></p> <p>Chooses inappropriate strategies because of limited repertoire or because he/she doesn't consider alternatives.</p> <p>Doesn't try to match strategy to goal(s).</p> <p>Limited set of concepts for and experience evaluating strategies.</p> <p>Is unaware of or doesn't consider consequences.</p> | <p><b>Find examples of:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--characters considering or trying different strategies.</li> <li>--outcomes of characters' strategies</li> </ul> <p>Generate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--alternative strategies that characters hadn't considered.</li> </ul> <p>Predict:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--outcomes of characters' strategies or alternatives they might have tried and explain reasons for prediction.</li> </ul> <p>Evaluate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Match between character's strategy and goal.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Strategy decision-making and outcomes:</b> Virgil's dad, confronted by Ms. Fleck, tells a lie to get his way, but Virgil is embarrassed. (S, pp. 40-42). Wilma tries unsuccessfully to convince her mother to accept her father's purchase of the car (G, p. 18).</p> <p>Father decides to drive to Mississippi to visit grandparents, but his local relatives are concerned so they decide to caravan with him (G, p.23-26).</p> <p>Father switches cars to a more modest one before continuing trip (G, p. 35-37).</p> <p>Father reviews outcomes of, the strategies he selected, and reflects upon need for social change. (G, p. 41-43)</p> | <p><b>Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Recall and describe a real-life situation involving a disagreement or obstacle to attaining one's goal (s)</li> <li>--Identify different possible strategies.</li> <li>--Evaluate alternative strategies based on fit with goals and likely consequences.</li> <li>--Recall and depict a situation in which you or another person didn't expect the consequences that resulted from the selected strategy.</li> </ul> |
|--|--|---|--|

\* For examples, G refers to Gold Cadillac by Mildred D. Taylor (grade 4 pages refer to Dial Books Edition, 1978) and S to Seedfolks by Paul Fleishman (grades 7-8 refer to paperback edition, 1997).

Teachers and other school personnel who have tried this approach have reported that infusing a social skills dimension into the language arts curriculum stimulates greater collaboration among students with diverse backgrounds and interests. Moreover, they have found that encouraging students to connect literature to their own life experiences stimulates involvement and interest on the part of students who are not normally energized by literature assignments.

### Using Classroom Modification and Impromptu Instruction

So far, we have looked at how to infuse instruction in Social Thinking Skills into the academic program through planned instruction. Tool Two offers school personnel extensive guidelines and illustrations for capitalizing on two other types of

opportunities for infusing instruction in Social Thinking Skills into the academic program: by modifying the classroom environment and routines and by offering impromptu instruction throughout the school day. By taking advantage of these instructional opportunities, school personnel can provide students with scaffolding that prompts students to practice these skills in real-life situations, and fosters growing independence in their application of these skills.

Tool Two includes numerous suggestions for modifying the environment and routines and for impromptu instruction. Illustrations from the suggestions in Tool Two are found in Table 3. As the suggestions for impromptu instruction (in the third column of Table 3) indicate, a hallmark of this type of instruction is prompting students to practice "thinking on their

feet" in real-life social situations. This is accomplished when teachers take a Socratic approach, that is, instead of giving students directives for handling social

situations, they pose questions and prompt students to engage in dialogue with their peers.

*Table 3.*

**Tool Three: Two Additional Ways of Delivering Instruction in Social Thinking Skills**

| Social Thinking Skills                     | Examples: Modifications of Environment or Routines   | Examples: Impromptu Instruction in a Problem Situation   |
|--|--|--|
| General Practice in Social Thinking Skills | <p>At the start of the year, enlist students to develop a list of rules for the classroom, drawing upon their social knowledge.</p> <p>Have a "Problem Box" in room for students (and teachers) to anonymously bring problems to class's attention.</p> <p>Post "Kid Talk" version of Social Problem Solving steps in classroom.</p> | <p>When the overall noise level had risen to an unacceptable level, the teacher asked the students to look at the posted classroom rules and tell him which rule tells them what needs to be different right now.</p>  |
| Social Perception                          | <p>Designate two corners of the room as "Calm Down Centers".</p> <p>One day per week, have students describe in their journal emotions that they experienced and the internal or visible/audible cues that indicated their feelings.</p>   | <p>Ask students to describe what happened (focusing on observations, not evaluations, of other's behavior).</p> <p>Call a student's attention to social cues and ask the student to interpret them.</p> <p>"I noticed that (other student) _____ . What do you think that means?"</p> <p>"Why don't you ask him" (i.e., whether that is a correct interpretation or which of the two possible interpretations you suggested is correct)?</p> <p>If students are upset, cue calming self and self-monitoring of arousal level:</p> <p>"I want each of you to go into (specific corner of classroom) and take 5 slow deep breaths. When you feel you are ready, you can finish telling me what happened."</p> <p>Prompt students to ask one another to explain why she/he acted or reacted in the way that she/he did. Have each student repeat the other student's explanation.</p> |

|                               |   |  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Goal Consideration            | <p>Posted reminder of twin goals for group work (accomplish task and find ways for everyone to contribute as much as possible). Included these goals in the self-evaluation rubric used for groups to reflect on their work together.</p>   | <p>Prompt student to express his/her goal (s): “What were you hoping was going to happen?” Encourage students to consider multiple goals when selecting a strategy: “You want to do this activity with Kevin -- Is there a way you can do this and get Aaron to feel okay about it too? Encourage student to consider a different goal: “Is it important to get to _____ or to keep Aaron as your friend right now?” “Is it more important to get _____ or keep _____ from happening right now?” Help student to recognize that another student’s goals differ from his/hers: “Victoria, you wanted to come up with a special idea so that maybe you could win the contest, while Kate, the contest wasn’t that important to you, you just wanted an idea to get the assignment done.”</p> |
| Strategy Selection/Evaluation | <p>Post sentence starters such as “When you _____, I feel....”. The “quick check” sheet for group members to use at the end of working on a task included items such as: “included many viewpoints and suggestions to get the task done.”</p>                                       | <p>Prompt students to consider goals when thinking of/selecting a strategy (see examples above). Prompt students to think of alternative strategies: “Can you think of another way to solve this problem?” Prompt student to consider likely consequences: “What will happen if you _____? Is there anything else that will happen?” Say: “Next time you feel this way, come tell me and we’ll figure out an idea for what to do”</p>  |
| Review Outcomes               | <p>Teacher builds into daily routine time to reflect on how the day went, such as how the students followed their rules and what goal they might work on the following day.</p> <p>“How did it turn out?” is posted as part of list of problem solving steps on classroom wall.</p> | <p>Prompt student to review outcomes: “How do you think this turned out?” “Did you think that this was going to happen?”</p>   |

To further illustrate modification of the environment and routines and impromptu instruction to stimulate practice in Social Thinking Skills, below is an example for the context of students working together on an academic learning activity. Note that the teacher’s role is to lead the

students to think through the situation so that the students themselves play an active role in evaluating their strategies and solving problems:

A seventh grade teacher used a self-evaluation rubric with his collaborative groups that included items that prompted

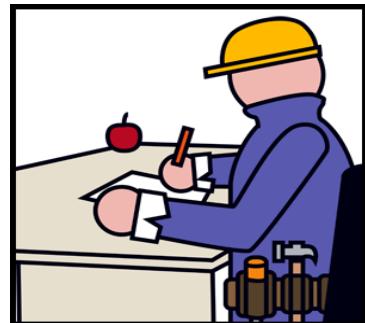
students that call participants' attention to social thinking skills. Items included "Did group moderator notice groups members' reactions to the activity and check out what they were thinking?" (social perception); "Did the group ask everyone for ideas?" (strategy selection); and "Did everyone participate in carrying out the activity?" (goal consideration). Another teacher might have modified this rubric by making it either more specific or more open-ended, depending on her judgment of the students' needs.

**"Teachers seem to know intuitively that in order to engage their students, they need to adjust the amount of new material that they present at any one time, the specific sensory modalities that they utilize, and the nature and intensity that they employ to connect new learning to the students' existing knowledge base."**

As this illustration and the examples in Table 3 indicate, educators can stimulate their students to practice Social Thinking Skills by modifying self-evaluation rubrics, by posting a schematic on the walls, or "tweaking" classroom routines to provide built-in opportunities for students to practice social thinking skills. In addition, through impromptu interaction that uses the language of social thinking skills, educators can pose questions that prompt students to apply these skills in every day

situations. Just as we strive to help our students to learn to perform academic tasks in a self-directed, self-reliant fashion, educators can capitalize on these instructional opportunities to ensure that students become more skillful at handling social challenges with a minimum of adult assistance.

#### *Icon for tool 3*



#### Tool Three: "How Do I Include More Kids?"

The third and final tool of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers, Tool Three: "How Do I Include More Kids?" offers tips on how to teach Social Thinking Skills with a focus on inclusion.

We borrowed from the Principles of Universal Design for Learning, developed at the Center for Applied Special Technologies ([www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org)), that urge educators to engage the diverse array of learners in today's classrooms by providing learners with multiple 1) ways to acquire information and skills; 2) ways to demonstrate what they know, and 3) pathways to encourage individual students' motivation to learn, e.g., by engaging their diverse interests and by offering appropriate challenges.

Table 4.

| Tool Three: Customizing Social Thinking Skills Instruction for Diverse Learners  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| Social Thinking Skills   | Teacher presents information about Social Thinking Skill in multiple ways   | Student practices and demonstrates Social Thinking Skill in multiple ways   | Teacher builds interest in learning Social Thinking Skill in multiple ways  |
| <b>Social Perception</b><br>“Paying attention to, and understanding what’s going on.”<br><br>Difficulty calming down/staying calm for accurate perception. | <p>Post “event intensity” thermometer so that when a student is upset he or she could rate the relative importance of what he/she is upset about.</p> <p>Post traffic light with the colored lights to illustrate the sequence of steps for calming down.</p>   | <p>Create a social story with the student about using a social thinking skill and read it together routinely, particularly before a time when it might “come in handy.”</p> <p>Establish signals with class or individual students that would indicate that they have “calmed down,” such as wiggling hands when arms are extended along their sides.</p> <p>Make up a commercial about how to stay calm when involved in a “difficult” social interaction.</p>                           | <p>Offers choice among writing a social story or commercial, or designing a poster about how to stay calm.</p> <p>Give student chart to keep track of classroom activities s/he completed while remaining calm</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Student chart amount of time needed to calm down, setting goals of decreasing amount of time.</p>   |
| <b>Goal Consideration</b><br>“What do I want to happen?”   | <p>Obtain Seedfolks in Audible version that can be played on MP3 player, downloaded to iTunes, or burned as a CD for about \$10. Students can listen or read ahead to prepare for discussions, or to complete a follow-up activity for homework.</p> <p>Obtain the Spanish version of Seedfolks, Semillas (Seedfolks), by Paul Fleischman for students to read along with English version to increase comprehension and engagement.</p> | <p>Begin each lesson with a statement about your Goals for the lesson, and ask, at the end, if the class thinks they reach the goal yet.</p> <p>For students who have difficulty during recess time, ask them to tell you, before they go out the door, what their goals are (what they want to have happen) during recess time (eg., play kickball, be with a friend who doesn’t like to play kickball, and then come up with a plan (such as for how to resolve conflicting goals).</p> | <p>Act out a social problem for practice identifying characters’ goals and record using digital or video camera.</p> <p>Ask students to set their own goals for how many “kind acts” they can perform in a day, or in a week. Each student can carry a small colored card around during the day for classmates and adults to write kind acts they experienced or observed being performed by the individual students. Later, review what happened and what obstacles arose and ways to overcome the obstacles to achieve their goals.</p> |

|  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Strategy Selection/<br/>Evaluation:</p> | <p>Show familiar video of characters trying different ways to solve a problem.</p> <p>Post various ways (strategies) to be a “good classmate” in the room and acknowledge when students used these strategies.</p> <p>Select text that is already available digitally. Show students how to listen to the text being read aloud by using Microsoft Reader which is available as a free download from Microsoft (for use on desktop and pocket palm PC’s, not Mac’s)</p> | <p>Provide a graphic organizer (GO) to accompany an example of social conflicts portrayed in the English/Language Arts fiction, such as The Gold Cadillac or Seedfolks. Ask students to list or draw several possible ways the characters might use to solve the social problem. Teacher may supply several examples on the GO for students who would benefit from the examples.</p> <p>Then, engage in discussion or actually “act out” what might happen if each of the possible strategies were used by the characters. Ask students to decide if each possible strategy led to what the characters were hoping would happen.</p> <p>Set up a “challenge” for groups of students to list all the possible ways to do something familiar, such as get to school on time, complete homework, clean up their room in time to play with friends. Groups could “switch lists” and tell what would happen if they tried each strategy, and then pick one they think would be best and tell why they think so.</p> | <p>Pose a fictitious situation that could occur in the classroom, such as a new student who didn’t speak English clearly joining a collaborative group to work on a project.</p> <p>Ask students to draw, act out, or tell 3 ways they can help the new student feel part of the group.</p> <p>Classmates evaluate the posed strategies, and vote on one per group that they think would be most helpful, and tell why.</p> <p>Scaffold reading and writing for struggling readers by using a text to speech program containing note features (such as Kurzweil 3000 for Mac and PC). Teachers can insert prompts &amp; questions about the goals and strategies of characters within the digitized text that students would respond as they are reading the story.</p> |
|--|---|--|---|

Teachers seem to know intuitively that in order to engage their students, they need to adjust the amount of new material that they present at any one time, the specific sensory modalities that they utilize to present material, and the nature and intensity of the strategies they employ to connect new learning to the students’ existing knowledge base. The principles of Universal Design for Learning provide a framework for

doing this in a systematic way across all dimensions of the lesson—by adjusting how the content is presented, how students practice and demonstrate what they are learning, by embedding features and choices into the lesson that enhance students’ motivation to engage in it. A selection of ideas for “customizing” instruction in Social Thinking Skills for students with different learning styles and abilities, gen-

erated with the help of the guidelines and suggestions in Tool Three, are presented in Table 4.

*(Right hand column: Students Reading a Text in Two Different Ways)*



*Table 5.*

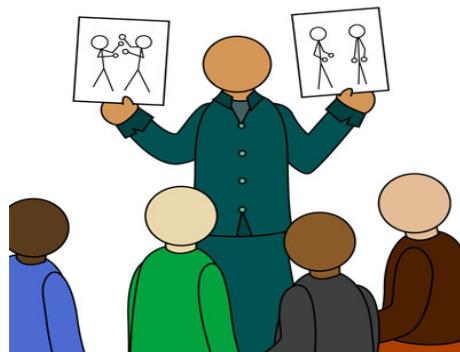
Change in Use by School Personnel of Instructional Practice Opportunities

Percentage of school personnel reporting change in their use of 3 instructional practice opportunities to Teach Social Thinking Skills, at 2 Points in Time

|   | At End of Workshop | One Year Later |
|---|--------------------|----------------|
| Type of Instructional Practice Opportunity:   |                    |                |
| Planned Instruction                           | 32                 | 83             |
| Impromptu Instruction                         | 71                 | 92             |
| Modification of Environment/Routines          | 29                 | 79             |
| Percentage Reporting Changes in Their Use of: |                    |                |
| At Least One Practice Opportunity             | 83                 | 96             |
| Two or More Practice Opportunities            | 43                 | 88             |

### Impact on Instructional Practices

*Teacher presenting ways to solve problems:*



Is it actually feasible for school personnel to make changes in their instructional practices through their use of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers? To address this question, we interviewed 24 school personnel from four communities who participated in workshops in which they were introduced to the Tools and had guided practice in using them. This sample of school professionals included twenty regular and special education teachers, three guidance counselors, and one school psychologist. We interviewed each person at

three points in time: first, at the start of the four-session workshop program, second, at the end of the school year, shortly after the workshop program was concluded, and second, finally, a year later, at the end of the following school year. At the second and third interviews, we asked school personnel if they had made any changes in their use of the three instructional practice opportunities highlighted in the Tools, in their teaching of Social Thinking Skills, and also asked them to describe specific changes. Table 5 presents the percentage of school personnel who described specific changes that they had made in their use of each instructional practice opportunities by each point in time.

The results provide evidence that it is feasible for school personnel to use the Tools for Teachers to capitalize on each of the three instructional practices and by doing so, to create new opportunities for their students to learn and practice applying Social Thinking Skills. Furthermore, the impact of the Tools on the three instructional practices increased as time went on. It was noteworthy that immediate changes occurred in the participants' use of impromptu instruction. However, it took additional time, and possibly the beginning of a new school year, for many of the participants to integrate instruction in Social Thinking Skills into their planned instruction and into the classroom environment and routines.

#### The “Tools for Teachers” Approach in Action

Teachers and other school personnel who implemented the social thinking skills approach in their classrooms provided us with examples of how these interventions led to improvements in their stu-

dents' ability to resolve social problems. Here are three of the examples that they cited.

*Example One.* Students with learning disabilities in a resource room at an elementary school complained that the students in their general education class were teasing and taunting them. Rather than addressing the problem with the general education teacher or students, the resource

**“The results provide evidence that it is feasible for school personnel to use the Tools for Teachers to capitalize on each of the three instructional practices.”**

room teacher, Ms. A., used impromptu instruction to help them deal with this painful situation. She helped them identify how they felt and how they wanted to be treated (social perception and goal consideration). The girls then brainstormed different ways to inform the teasers. For each of three strategies they generated, Ms. A. encouraged the students to talk about what they thought would happen as a result of using each possible choice of action and what they were comfortable doing (strategy selection and evaluation). The students decided that they wanted to speak directly to the teasers.

At this point impromptu instruction evolved into planned instruction involving the entire resource room class. Ms. A. contacted the School Psychologist, who wrote a social script for the girls, incorporating the girls' ideas about what they wanted to say about the teasing and for expressing how they felt. The girls then practiced this

script in front of other resource room students.

Ms. A. then contacted the general education teacher to inform her about the teasing and to plan for a safe way for the teased girls to speak directly to the teasers. The general education teacher set up a class meeting in her classroom. At this meeting, the teased girls spoke to the entire class about how they felt about teasing, and how they wanted to be treated. They read from their script at times. The general education classmates were stunned, and responded with support and apologies. Ms. A. then prompted additional discussion by asking the general education students how many had been aware of the teasing, why they hadn't done anything to try to stop it, and what they could do in the future if this recurred. The general education teacher gave the students a written assignment in which she asked them to reflect on their role in what had happened and what they had learned.

**“Mrs. B identified lack of empathy as a common skill that needed to be addressed. Specifically, she observed that many of her students didn’t recognize their classmates’ feelings and needs and rarely offered help or support to one another.”**

The girls returned to the resource room and proudly recounted what had happened. By all accounts, the problem was resolved as the atmosphere in the classroom changed dramatically. During the rest of the year, teachers reported occasionally overhearing general education students

cautioning their classmates to “...not say that..” or mention that what a classmate said “...hurt my feelings.” If teasing occurred again, the students settled it among themselves.

*Example Two.* Ms. B. teaches elementary school students with intellectual disabilities in a self-contained classroom. Through observation of students’ social interaction over a period of several weeks, Mrs. B. identified lack of empathy as a common skill limitation that needed to be addressed. Specifically, she observed that many of her students didn’t recognize their classmates’ feelings and needs and rarely offered help or support to one another.

Using the approach we’ve outlined, Ms. B. decided to use a combination of all three instructional practice opportunities—planned instruction, modification of the classroom routines, and impromptu instruction—to help students learn this skill. For planned instruction, she read books to her students that helped them to learn about awareness of others’ feelings and about helping others through problem-solving contributions. For example, one book, *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1998), was about a silly penguin who is disorganized while all of the other penguins are quite organized. At first they dismiss Tacky as being too odd, but eventually learn that because of his unconventional, “disorderly” thinking style, he can often be the one to think through solutions to their most challenging problems. Passages in the book that describe Tacky noticing others’ feelings and problems and coming up with solutions served as a jumping off point for discussing awareness of one another’s feelings and needs and how each student can

come up with good ideas for helping others.

To provide an opportunity for the students to practice empathy, Ms. B. modified the classroom routines to provide students with an opportunity to practice noticing cues and helping others, by adding a classroom activity to the weekly schedule, consisting of playing board and card games. During the games, she would make observations, directing one student's attention to cues that indicate what another student is feeling or when another student is having difficulty. She would prompt students with questions like "What do you think that this classmate is feeling?" "How do we find out what she's feeling?" "What can we do to be helpful?"

Ms. B. would also observe and comment if a student was doing a good job making sure that each of his or her play partners was participating and having fun. She also suggested to students that they check in with their partners to ask whether they were enjoying the game, and if not, then she prompted the student to ask, "Why not?" She facilitated the students' conversation about what might be wrong, and what they might do about it.

Ms. B. reported that students began to help one other when a child was stuck playing the game. Ms. B. also reported that these pro-social behaviors began to generalize to other times during the school. Students began to initiate conversation with one another more frequently and noticed and offered help to one another more often when they were stuck doing their academic work. In fact, Ms. B. reported that the students have become too interactive and helpful during academic times. Now, she is working with them on learning when to

help, and when to let the classmate help him or herself.

A powerful positive example occurred recently that involved a young boy who had been very self-absorbed, not noticing his classmates much at all, when he first joined the class. After months of participating in the above process, he, too, began to interact and check in more and notice his friends. He became particularly close to a young girl who occasionally had seizures. Recently, when a substitute was in the room, he and the young girl were partners in a science experience that involved small blinking lights. He noticed that the young girl was slightly tilting her head, which was a sign that she was starting to have a seizure. He quickly left the room to find the nurse, remaining calm yet determined. He returned with the nurse who assisted the young girl to rest safely. He was not dramatic or overly excited, but just followed through with what he had noticed and tried to be helpful.

*Example Three.* Teacher C. teaches second graders in a general education class that includes students with disabilities. Learning about the Social Thinking Skills model led Teacher C. to realize that her students' lack of awareness and consideration of their social goals contributed to recurrent social problems. The students would clash because they have conflicting goals and did not reflect on their goals when selecting strategies.

Teacher C. initially introduced the topic of social goals through literature. She would pause while reading a story to the class and ask the students to identify the characters' goals. Later, she would ask students whether the strategies the story characters used helped them to accomplish

these goals. These activities helped the students to become comfortable to use the term “goal” to describe people’s motivations in every day interaction and to identify social goals in a literature context.

The next step Teacher C. took was to work with two of the students on considering their goals for recess. Even though these girls were good friends, they frequently had conflicts with one another on the playground. One of the girls, who liked sports more than the other, wanted to play dodge ball, while the other girl didn’t. She urged her friend to play too but her friend didn’t want to. The latter friend was upset and felt that her former friend no longer wanted to be friends with her. She said to her “If you wanted to be my friend, you would stay with me!”

The teacher inserted a goal consideration activity into the daily routine of lining up to go to recess. After all of the students had lined up, she asked the two girls to stand together at the rear of the line and to stay for a moment when the rest of the class went to recess. She asked each if they think of themselves as friends, and when they agreed, asked how each of them feels when they argue at recess. Then, she asked each girl, “What goal do you have at recess today?” that is, what does each want to do when they get outside. Through further questioning, she got each student to acknowledge that their goals were conflicting, and that they could not happen at the same time. Teacher C. also remarked that one of the girls actually had 2 goals—playing sports and spending time with her friend. Teacher C. then asked the girls to decide what they could do that day, and then what they might do differently the next day, so that they could see the possibility of working out a solution.

Over the ensuing weeks, the teacher made a daily habit of asking each girl, before the students went out to recess, what she planned to do *that* day at recess. After several weeks, she faded out this procedure. The girls’ conflict was resolved for the remaining weeks of the year, and no incidents were reported during the following year when the girls were in third grade. Later in the year, Teacher C. used the same procedure with another pair of her students (which included a child with Asperger’s disorder), to help them to resolve their conflicts about their choice of recess activities.

**“School personnel do not have to choose between devoting precious instructional time either to social skills instruction or to academic skills teaching.”**

#### Final Thoughts

As we can see from the preceding examples, school personnel do not have to choose between devoting precious instructional time either to social skills instruction or to academic skills teaching. The Social Skills Tools for Teachers assists school personnel in infusing instruction in critical social skills into their existing academic program, by capitalizing on a variety of instructional opportunities that are present during every school day. The Social Skills Tools for Teachers is an appealing resource because it shows school personnel how to use their existing instructional program as the foundation for social skills instruction, instead of requiring that school personnel radically change what they are presently doing. As our interviews with workshop participants indicated, the integration by

teachers and other school personnel of social skills instruction into their existing instructional program is likely to occur gradually, step by step, rather than all at once. However, this type of change is just the type of organic evolution that is likely to endure and have a long-term positive impact on classroom instructional practices. In our experience, most educators want to address their students' needs for social skill instruction but find it a struggle to deliver social skills instruction while addressing other instructional priorities. With the help of the Social Skills Tools for Teachers, school personnel can continually devise novel ways to inject a social skills dimension into the life of the classroom, and by doing so, improve both academic and social outcomes.

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### About the Authors:

**James S. Leffert** was Senior Research Associate at the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and currently has a clinical psychology practice in Cambridge and Framingham, Massachusetts.

**Mary E. Brady** is Director of Professional Development at the Center for Social Development and Education and teaches at the Graduate College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

**Gary N. Siperstein** is Founder and Director of the Center for Social Development and Education.